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THE OGDEN STANDARD

Part Two

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The Road Musician

By Helen Corinne Hambridge

SHIRLEY, sitting out on the front porch, sewing, was startled out of her summer afternoon's waking dream by seeing a man enter the gate. Not that such a sight was unusual, but such a man was.

As he came slowly and deliberately up the box-hedged walk towards the house she noted him carefully. He was tall and wore a knickerbocker suit of dull brown velveteen, with an old slouch hat pulled rakishly over his eyes. Around his neck was knotted a red silk handkerchief, and through his open coat was visible a blue flannel shirt. In one hand he carried a violin case, in the other a heavy stick for walking, and on his shoulders was strapped a light knapsack.

audible from the rooms beyond. "You may have some of that if you like."

"Perhaps your parents will object," the stranger said, as if not wishing to get her into trouble by his request. She could not be over seventeen or eighteen, he thought—though in fact she was twenty—and therefore was certainly not the mistress of the farmhouse itself.

"I have no parents," Shirley said simply; "there is only Aunt Luella."

"And Aunt Luella?" he interrogated.

"Is away nursing a sick friend. She is the village good angel." Then she added, as if she had perhaps spoken imprudently: "And of course there is Ben, the hired man, and Hannah, the hired girl."

The fiddler looked at the serving-maid quite as gravely as he had looked at the girl on the porch. "You are quite right," he said, "but I really prefer this to a wood-pile just now"—touching his violin.

"Of course you do. You tramps is all lazier than cold molasses. But we never turn no one away hungry; do we, miss?"

Shirley said that they did not; and told Hannah to lay an extra plate on the dining-table.

Hannah was horrified. "Land sakes!" she exclaimed. "You don't mean that you're a-goin' to set down with a common tramp off the road! Why, yer-rant will be madder than a wet hen when she hears about such goin's on."

THE TRAMP TUCKED HIS OLD BROWN FIDDLE UNDER HIS CHIN AND BEGAN TO PLAY.

"A peddler," thought Shirley, "or a wandering musician. Probably the latter, though I never saw such a clean-looking one. He has rather a brigandish air, too, and if he swaggered instead of walking so straightforwardly I think I'd call for Hannah to come to my assistance." These thoughts passed rapidly through the girl's mind, but her face reflected none of them.

The stranger, coming to the foot of the steps and seeing the girl for the first time, took off his hat with a low bow, and she saw that he was very thin, indeed so emaciated that his clothes just hung on his body. His face was white, but a slightly bronzed look was beginning to appear, as if he were living out in the sun and wind a great deal. He had soft, curling brown hair and a high white forehead. These details Shirley added to her mental inventory of the man before he spoke, which he did not do until he had deposited his violin case on the step of the porch. Noting the girl's gaze he appeared a little confused, for a dull streak of red mounted to his temples, but he said unhesitatingly:

"I would like to ask for a dinner here, if I may."

Shirley drew her brows together in annoyance at this speech. It had not been what she expected, though she could not have told why. She was ashamed of the momentary interest the man had awakened in her. He was a mere tramp, after all.

"And," he continued, "I can pay for it in either of three ways: one, by playing some tunes on my fiddle here, another, by making you a little pen-and-ink sketch of your house, and the third, in vulgar pence—though in that my limit is fifteen cents for a meal."

Shirley laughed uneasily. "Dinner is over hours and hours ago," she answered. "In fact, I think supper is under way now," for a cheerful rattle of dishes was

"Thank you," the man replied. "Then what is the price to be—a tune, a penny, or a sketch?"

"The tune, if you please."

The tramp opened his violin case, took out an old brown fiddle, tucked it under his chin and began to play. It was early summer. The dooryard was rife with roses, and the porch thickly screened by Japanese honeysuckle vines; and as he played their combined fragrance, stirred by the soft summer breeze, smote his senses like an intoxicant.

Ah, indeed, how he played! The girl sat listening, her hands folded quietly in her lap, her thoughts far away. He questioned as he saw her abstracted look whether she understood music. He could not tell, for Shirley's face did not reflect her emotions.

He was soon enlightened, however, for as he concluded she said rather timidly: "I don't like Strauss—that is, not for just now. Play me some Italian music; the kind that fits in with the roses and June."

So the musician played on and on and well earned his supper, and as he played he wondered if this maiden in the simple white frock knew she was very beautiful, with her rose-leaf cheeks and her red-gold hair. Did she know, too, that her voice was like a little strain of a Strauss waltz itself? "Pshaw! of course she does," he jeered at himself. "She is probably the village beauty and has half the swains of the countryside at her feet!"

He brought down his bow with a start as a loud and distinctly antagonistic voice from the doorway called out, "Tea's ready. That there fiddler can take his'n in the kitchen with the hired man. I s'pose what he's hangin' 'round here for is somethin' to eat. If yer-rant was here she'd put him to work at the wood-pile instead of sawin' on that old squeaky thing."

"Please do what I ask you to, Hannah," Shirley said, and Hannah flounced off to do as she was bid.

The man held up his dust-stained hands ruefully, and Shirley noticed their long, slender fingers. "I think Hannah is right again," he said, smiling gravely. "I'll just have a snack in the kitchen."

"I wasn't brought up in that fashion," the girl answered with some spirit. "My father always taught us that the stranger within our gates must share our best. Of course," she added laughingly, "these are Aunt Luella's gates, but you are a gentleman even——"

"Even if I am a tramp," he concluded for her.

"You'll find a basin and water and soap on the back porch," she told him. "And Hannah will give you a clean towel—and don't mind her scolding, please. Hannah means well."

As they ate their hot biscuits, omelet, and strawberries with cream they said little, but the girl wondered more and more what sort of man this could be who tramped the country and played for his dinner, yet who ate like a gentleman, and certainly talked like one. When he did speak, however, it was only of the country through which he was passing—the plenitude of things, the general prosperity, and the glorious air.

"I don't know very much about this part of the world," she told him, in answer to some question he had put to her. "I've only been here a month. It's nice, of course, but these hills don't take the place of my blue Virginia mountains. I'm a Southerner, you see, but since my father and mother died several years ago I've been at a boarding-school in Washington. Now I've come up here to mother's sister and in the fall I'm going to teach in the village school." She flushed deeply as she concluded hurriedly, ashamed that she had been led by his absorbed interest in her every word into speaking of her affairs to a stranger.

"And I live nowhere," he told her, as if owing her a confidence in return. "But I have been an orphan, too, these many years. The sky is my mother and the earth my father, and the road is my pal and fellow traveler. It goes with me step by step, opening out its heart as we go, always new, strange and alluring. It waits for me now at the gate, as you see, and I must go on. Thank you for a supper that was meant for a king and not for a poor tramp."

Shirley followed him out on the porch. "Won't you play for me just once more before you go?" she entreated. "It has been so long since I heard any really good music. In Washington I used to go to some concerts, and the opera whenever it came there; but now I never hear anything better than the 'Frolic of the Frogs' or 'Silvery Waves' of the village music teacher."

The tramp smiled and again laid his fiddle under his chin. He played in the twilight now, for dusk had nearly fallen. The west was red still, but a single great star burned there. Seeing it he played the evening star song. "O, thou sublime, sweet evening star!" the music yearned; and there seemed, as he played, a bridge between earthly thoughts and those strange emotions born of God.

Shirley shut the gate with a little click behind him as he finally went out, but he lingered yet a moment outside, as if loath to leave the little garden.

"Good-night," he said reluctantly.

"And you," the girl exclaimed bluntly, "you who play these beautiful things—and understand them—you are an ordinary tramp! I cannot believe it."

The man flushed deeply, and then laughed. Then he said, "Don't think me just an ordinary tramp, but an extraordinary one, who likes Verdi and Wagner, and bread and butter in plenty, but who most of all likes and needs the freedom of God's out-of-doors." He lifted his hat, but she held him back.

"But it isn't always sunrise or sunset," she said. "It's dark, creepy night, and there are fearful storms. Where do you find shelter such times?"

The man, as if prompted by a sudden impulse, lifted his violin out of its box again. "Listen, and I'll tell you," he said. He played once more, and this time he sang, too, in a deep, rich barytone:

"By road and river, countryside and town,
I wander daily with my fiddle brown,
Creeping under barns so gladly,
When outside the tempest howls,
Playing sadly, playing madly,
Waking up the rats and owls.

"Ah, it is gay, night and day,
Fair and cloudy weather;
Fiddle and I wandering by
Over the world together.

"Down by the willow, summer nights I lie,
Flowers for my pillow, and for roof the sky,
Playing all that heart remembers,
Old, old songs from far away.
Golden Junes and bleak Decembers,
Rise around me as I play.

"Ah, it is gay, night and day,
Fair and cloudy weather;
Fiddle and I wandering by
Over the world together."

The listener's eyes were moist, but she smiled as if to hide her feeling. "Promise me," she said, "that you will come back this way again this summer and play for me."

The man turned resolutely. "I promise," he said, "—God willing."

He went at last, but turned once at the crossroads where he might have a last sight of the white farmhouse. Shirley was still standing at the gate gazing after his retreating form.

In late September the tramp passed that way again—not the same tramp, for he was made new by the healing of nature. He was no longer thin and pale, but stalwart and ruddy, and he swung along with the buoyancy of health.

Shirley came from the village, where she had been to get the mail. It was a good mile and a half to the farmhouse, but she liked the walk, and better still to get away from the narrow circle of her aunt's insular but kindly nature and from Hannah's sharp tongue. As she got quite out of the village she was surprised to hear music coming from behind a great oak-tree by the side of the road. She stopped suddenly, for she recognized the song her "extraordinary tramp"—as she always called him in her thoughts—had played and sung for her that June day. Seeing her pause he came out in the road and bowed to her.

"I was in the village," he explained, "and saw you go into the post-office. I came out here and waited on the chance of meeting you and keeping my promise to play for you again." He did not tell her how many miles he had come out of his way to keep that promise.

"I thought," he continued, "if I went on to the house your aunt might be there, and perhaps—well, perhaps she might not appreciate music."

"She wouldn't," Shirley laughed, "except 'Onward, Christian Soldiers' or 'Old Hundred'"

"Which, unfortunately, are not in my repertoire," he laughed in return. "May I walk by your side for a few steps?"

"Why not?" the girl answered.

"There is no reason, really," he said in return. "The road has no conventions."

"We are three," she said, smiling, "you, your pal, and myself. You may walk with me as far as the cross-roads; there by the big willow you shall play for me again, and then you can go on your own free way and I will go back to my conventions," she ended, a little sadly.

Shirley scanned his face in one swift glance. "You look different—a great deal better," she said.

"I am no longer ill," he told her; and then went on, speaking rapidly, "I think I will tell you part of my story, at least," he said. "It will take only a few moments. I should like to have left you that June day with a better opinion of me, but as it was only an experiment I didn't think I ought to. I am not a tramp—a real hobo," he told her, "but a very ordinary man in the disguise of one. I am Willard Baker, newspaper man, at your service."

"And I am Shirley Baker, schoolmistress," she said.

"Yes, I know," he answered. "I found out by a few discreet questions back there in the village to-day. I did not do it for curiosity, but because I wanted to know the name of the one person who, in all my wanderings, has treated me like an equal. A flannel shirt and knapsack make lots of difference, don't they?" he said a trifle bitterly.

"It's like this," he went on. "While on a story one day in the New York slums I contracted typhoid fever. I had it for seven months, and when I finally got on my feet again they were about all I had left. The doctors in the hospital said my heart and lungs were shaky, and that I must take a long sea voyage, or a summer in the mountains, and that I must sleep out of doors if possible. As I had just fifty dollars to my name—the paper had kept me on the pay-roll as long as they decently could—the thing looked preposterous. But I didn't intend to let a little thing like the lack of money keep me down after fighting for my life all those months. So I thought out the plan of coming up here in the Berkshires and tramping it for a while. I was studying music and could play fairly well, and I could draw in a slap-dash sort of way. I thought the two combined might earn me food enough, though I should have preferred the more muscular sort of work. I'd have sawed wood that day, you know," he added quickly, as if he wanted to explain something particularly, "if I had been able."

"You see," he concluded, "the experiment has been a success. I'm on my way back to the city again. The paper will give me a job, so it's shoulder arms and forward march until the next onslaught of fate."

"I'm so glad!" Shirley said, her eyes shining. "I knew all the time, someway, that you weren't even that extraordinary tramp you told me to think you. I used to wonder how you were getting on, and shudder nights when there was a hard storm."

"You needn't have worried," he replied, smiling back at her. "I would lie in a barn those nights and wonder if you would give me strawberries and cream when I came your way again."

"Hardly," laughed Shirley, "—in September!"

The old brown fiddle was brought into use once again and this time its music was a bridge between hearts young with joy and rich with hope.

"Promise me," the player said, when he had finished, "that I may come this way again and play for you. I'll get acquainted with the village preacher, so I can get him to introduce us—for Aunt Luella's sake," he smiled. "Can you promise?"

"I promise," said Shirley smiling, "and now good-night." She held out her hand to him and he took it for a brief second, and held it in his own. Then she started homeward in the dusk.

From far down the road a strain of music was wafted back—a joyful, happy tune, to which the words of an old nursery rhyme had been set:

"Bobby Shafto's gone to sea,
Silver buckles on his knee;
He'll come back and marry me,
Little Bobby Shafto."

"BY ROAD AND RIVER, COUNTRYSIDE AND TOWN, I WANDER DAILY WITH MY FIDDLE BROWN."